

Republicans fear a backlash if conservatives force a government shutdown. But in the long run, Democrats have most to lose

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Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell listens as House speaker John Boehner speaks during a Republican party news conference at the Capitol in Washington, DC, after the Senate passed an earlier spending bill (on 2 March) to forestall the immediate prospect of a government shutdown. Photograph: Jonathan Ernst/Getty Images

On Thursday 17 March, the Senate approved the House-passed continuing resolution that funds the federal government until 8 April. This is the sixth short-term continuing resolution (CR) since the end of September 2010, with no end in sight as Democrats and Republicans blame each other for the continuing budget impasse. "We look like idiots to the American people," says Allen West (Republican, Florida), one of the 54 Tea Party-backed House Republicans who voted against the bill, defying the House speaker John Boehner (Republican, Ohio).

The new CR cuts \$6bn in federal spending. But conservative House and Senate Republicans say this is not enough. They want to pursue another \$57bn of cuts in this year's budget, with defunding for healthcare reform, family planning, national broadcasting, endowments for the arts, transportation and education. Confronted with a mounting challenge from House Republicans, Boehner expressed his frustration:

"Listen I understand that some of our members want to do more, but what is it in this bill they disagree with? Nothing. Nothing."

This rebellion is backed by Newt Gingrich, former Republican majority leader, who in a recent Washington Post editorial, urged the GOP "to stick to its principles". Gingrich is a bad omen for most Republicans, including Tea Party leaders. In the winter of 1995 and 1996, thanks to a standoff between Gingrich and President Bill Clinton over budgetary issues, the federal government shut down twice. Those shutdowns persisted for 26 days in total, a record in the history of the federal government. Much to their dismay, Republicans ended up being blamed by the public, and Clinton received a major reelection boost. Understandably, the Republican leadership is traumatised by this memory.

The similarities between 1995 and 2011 are real, and Republicans are right to fear the ghost of 1995. According to a recent opinion poll, 46% of the public thinks the Republicans in Congress would be more responsible for the shutdown than President Obama. John Boehner does not want to walk into this trap. Left to his own devices, he would probably work out a compromise with the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, for the rest of the fiscal year 2011. Conservative Democrats would have to agree to move the political centre a little bit more to the right. They could probably live with it, though, as they have done for the past 30 years or so. Things are different for liberal Democrats, who have to respond to the concerns of public sector workers and ethnic minorities in their districts. But Conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans could meet somewhere in the middle, around another \$10bn cuts.

Trouble is, the Tea Party stands in the way. Confident that they ride on a major anti-government wave that is not going away anytime soon, Tea Party Republicans are not at all interested in compromise with the Democrats. "Why would I compromise with a party that's inept? We don't need to meet half way," says Allen West. House Republicans are being pushed to the right. "The addition of new freshmen representatives is having a tremendous impact in the House," says Becky Rogness, press secretary for Congresswoman Michele Bachmann (Republican, Minnesota), who founded the Tea Party caucus in the House. Rogness writes, via email:

"For example, we were looking to save the taxpayers \$100bn, and initially, what was presented was less than that amount. So, all of the Tea Party influence, together with the new freshmen, demanded a minimum of \$100bn in cuts, and that's the amount that finally was reached."

Besides, they believe that the Republican leadership owes them, big time: "We saved them

from the dictatorship of Nancy Pelosi," says West.

Some Democrats think that former House majority leader Dick Armey, the other spectre of the 1995-1996 shutdowns, is pulling the strings of the Tea Party behind the scenes. Dick Armey is the chairman of Freedom Works, the product of a merger between Citizens for a Sound Economy (set up by David Koch, of Koch Companies) and Empower America. For Democrats, the Tea Party enables the dark side of the force ("activist" billionaires like the Koch brothers) to complete the unfinished business of the 1994 conservative revolution.

"He [Armey] has been trying to push the Republican party over to the right for a long time," says former Democratic whip and South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn, and now, "he is now doing it from the outside." In all fairness, the Democrats are on to something here. As Armey writes in the prologue of *Give us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto*:

"Looking back, the revolution of 1994 was an insider takeover. Insider jobs like 1994 are an inherently weak strategy because they are too dependent on the good intentions of people astride the levers of power ... The Tea Party movement has the power to break the cycle by establishing a constituency standing at the dead centre of American politics."

Clearly, Freedom Works has tried to capitalise on the raw energy of the movement, with some success. But the Tea Party cannot be reduced to the likes of Armey and Gingrich. It is a very broad church, with several contradictions. That's why leaders such as Amy Kremer, leader of the American Grassroots Coalition, prefer to stick to fiscal conservatism and constitutionally limited government. To address issues like gay marriage and entitlement reform is to open a Pandora's box of longstanding social conservative grievances. While half of Tea Party constituents object to "Obamacare", gay marriage and family planning, they still want to keep social security and Medicare. Meanwhile, younger constituents, including some Christian activists, are relaxed about gay rights.

"Republicans are riding the back of the tiger," warns Jim Clyburn, paraphrasing JFK in his 1961 inaugural address (Kennedy said, "in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside"). It does not take a political genius to figure out that this is precisely what Democrats, including President Obama himself, hope will happen. "This weapon will be their own destruction," predicts Clyburn. The majority of Tea Party freshmen, emboldened by their success, want a government shutdown. Democrats hope this will scare off independents and moderate Republicans for good, precipitating the Tea party into the dustbin of

history.

Certainly, Democrats could be right to think that the movement, like a wasp, will sting and die – though I am not so sure. But they forget that by moving the political centre further to the right, the Tea Party will have inflicted a major political damage. Equality and taxation have become dirty words in America: that's no mean achievement for rightwing populism.